

Committee on Resources

Witness Testimony

Testimony of
Herald Egbert, President, GROGA
Green River Outfitter and Guides Association (GROGA)
Before the House Resources Committee
on National Parks, Forests and Lands
Subcommittee
April 30, 1996

History

My name is Herald Egbert and I am currently the elected president of the Green River Guides and Outfitters Association. (GROGA) This Association represents the 13 legally permitted outfitters offering commercial guiding services on the Green River in northeastern Utah. These outfitters offer guided float- fishing trips, scenic floats, walk-wade guided fishing trips and fishing instruction and combinations of these trips. GROGA is recognized by the U.S. Forest Service as the body representing the commercial interests on the Green River and has received official recognition as such. Since 1987, the commercial use on the Green River has grown from 400 trips in 1987 to the 1995 total of 3786 trips.

I have managed the guide services for the Flaming Gorge Lodge since 1987.. Since that time, we have grown to our position as the largest outfitter on the river, running almost 1500 trips in 1995.

All but one of the permits issued for the Green River are one-year term permits, meaning that they have to be re-applied for each year with no assurance that the permit will be re-issued the next year. This alone has created great hardships for all of the outfitters, none of which are assured of being able to operate the next year.

The Green River is divided into three sections, with different management objectives and plans for each. The first seven miles from the Flaming Gorge Dam to Little Hole, is know as Section A. According to the Forest Service sponsored Green River Use Capacity Study of 1991, page 21, 90 % of all fishers and 86% of non-fishers used Section A. Commercial guide usage is only 5% of the total use of the A Section of the Green River. The second nine mile section from Little Hole to Brown's Park is known as Section B. This section receives about 8% of all fishers and about 13% of all non-fisher use. The remaining 1% of fishing use and non-fishing use is on the C Section, a thirteen mile section from Brown's Park to the Colorado State line.

The commercial use on the Green River has grown from approximately 100 trips in 1986, to the 1995 total of 3786 trips. The 3786 total use figure represents an increase of 6% from the use level of 1994.

I have seen the Green River change from a few fishers in certain seasons and many summer recreational

users to a year-round fishery with people fishing the river every day of the year. The greatest change I have seen on the river is in the numbers of persons using the river. The skill level of the fishers has increased as well as the quality of equipment used. Many more private dory boats are noticeable as are also the increased number of guided fishing trips being run by the commercial outfitters. On a negative note, due to the increased usage, there has been a noticeable increase in litter in the Green River Corridor and also an increased number of user conflicts.

Background of relationship between outfitter/guides and U.S.Forest Service

1986- First real increase in number of outfitter/guides from 3 to 5

1987- More O/G permits are issued to a total of 14

1987- Fall, U.S.F.S. has received over 60 new permit applications

Meeting with O/G

Decision to issue no new permits until situation is studied

Some applicants protest-congressional inquiries, hence, scoping review by Dave Keddy

No restrictions on O/G use

1988- February, Dave Keddy meets with Stephen Vletas in Teton Village, Wyo.

Keddy/Vletas discuss and decide methods for O/G usage on Green River, complicated calculations bring about 2440 system. Appendix 1

Green River O/G not included in discussion or decision.

1988- February, Dave Keddy issues E.A.

Established 2440 System as part of Operating Plan, only for 1 or 2 years until new system in place

One year study initiated and contract let out to begin in fall of 1988

O/G struggle to work under new 2440 System, problems, trials, and errors

No weekend restrictions

Dave Keddy retires (not sure of date)

1989- Study not started, maybe by fall

Mike Stubbs arrives

O/G continue under 2440 System

No weekend restrictions

Fall-Study started

1990- Study conducted-completed in fall

O/G continue under 2440 System

O/G asked to voluntarily restrict weekend use, successful as noted in study Appendix 2

1991- Study released in April

O/G continue under 2440 System, told this would change next year (1992) after study recommendations are evaluated

Mandatory weekend restrictions set at 2 boats per day among all O/G, no discussion with O/G

Mike Stubbs proposal announced and distributed Appendix 3

F.S. and GROGA meet, discussed recommendations and weekend restrictions

GROGA response in letter to F.S. dated 11/18/91 Appendix 4

GROGA requests recognition as association

1992- Mike Stubbs transferred (date not sure)
O/G told to wait for Stubbs replacement
O/G told to be patient, new recommendations will resolve issue
O/G continue under 2440 System
Mandatory weekend restrictions continue
Fred Houston arrival (again not sure of date)

1993- Fred Houston- can't get to issue, other things more pressing
F.S. things are behind because of late replacement of Stubbs
F.S. recognizes GROGA
O/G continue under 2440 System
Mandatory weekend restrictions continue

1994- O/G continue under 2440 System
F.S. drops April and October from 2440 System to allow some O/G growth.
Fred Houston works on E.A. but too late for implementation in 1995

1995- April, Public meetings, proposal and preferred alternative explained but public comment not allowed, information meeting only
Deadline for written comments-May 1
GROGA insists that it is hard to comment on E.A. recommendations without knowing how recommendations will be managed
F.S. response-GROGA submit proposal
April 28 & 29, Dennis Breer and Herald Egbert meet and put together a proposal and get GROGA membership approval before May 1 deadline
May 1, GROGA submits proposal
May 1. O/G submit letters of comment individually on E.A.
June- Dennis Breer and Fred Houston meet-Fred says parts of proposal accepted, which parts? Will it work if only part is used?
Actual written F.S. proposal never seen
September, Fred informs GROGA- will have to operate under 2440 System in 1996
No E.A., No Prospectus
No written response to written comments or proposals, only rumors
O/G continue under 2440 System
December, F.S. O/G meeting, concerns expressed by F.S. about E.A. GROGA has not seen recommendations and now doubt if our proposal is workable, in our haste in April, some things were not well thought through. Our concern is that we don't set ourselves up with another version of the 2440 system. GROGA requests to see E.A. and recommendations as written now.

1996- January, O/G and F.S. meet to work on E.A.
No E.A.
O/G continue under 2440 System (this system originally set up for one or two years max.) Appendix 5 good and bad of the 2440 System
January to present, approximately every two weeks we are told the E.A. will be out in a couple of weeks, any day now, still no E.A.

This is only a hasty summary of ten years of frustrations. We are still working under a system of use

allocation made up in someone's office in a couple of hours that was meant as only a temporary, stopgap measure. The 2440 System did not work well then and hasn't improved ten years later.

My perceptions of the Green River and its Uses

I believe the Green River to be one of the most beautiful places on earth. The crystal clear water, spectacular canyons and the incredible trout fishery, combine to form a unique and unmatched experience for any visitor. Every visitor, regardless of their background, is touched by the splendor and majesty of the Flaming Gorge and the Green River. The U.S. Forest Service Study of 1991, showed 114,00 visitors to the Green River alone and 92% of those said that the Green River was the primary reason for their visit.

There have been impressive improvements to the facilities around and along the Green River. The paving of the Little Hole Road and development and paving of parking areas at Little Hole have been obvious improvements. Great improvements have been made to the 11 mile trail along the bank of the river and the campgrounds below the Little Hole area have been vastly improved with the addition of picnic tables and fire rings to each. Concrete runway slabs of cement have been placed as boat launching ramps to make launching and retrieving of all types of boats safer and easier. Composting toilets and flush-type toilets have been installed. Many other improvements have been made to make the experiences of visitors more enjoyable.

I believe that the majority of people come to the Green River to participate in activities in the first section of the river, the A Section. The 1991 study showed this to be the case, 90% of fishers and 86% of non-fishers used the A Section, and I believe that this trend still continues with close to these same percentages today. Because so much of the use is concentrated in this section, I was amazed when the study reported on page 189, that 97% of the visitors were satisfied with their experience on the Green River.

The commercial guiding operations, although only 5-7% of the total use on the river, are a small but very noticeable part of the use of the Green River. As a group, they are the most successful fishers, are the safest user group on the river by virtue of their experience, and are the only user group required to have first aid training. They are required to carry upgraded flotation devices and first aid and rescue equipment that are not required of the general public. They have been responsible for many rescues and assists to other users on the river and have a far greater impact, for good, on the river that their numbers would indicate.

Commercial users of the Green River have been a great boost to the local economy. A study done in Montana showed that every dollar spent locally for recreation passed through the local economy nine times before it left the area. The commercial outfitting operations on the Green River generated just over \$1,000,000 in guide fees alone. This figure does not include amounts spent locally and elsewhere for food, lodging, licenses, equipment sales and rentals, and travel expenses for car rentals and airlines. I think that the commercial interests on the Green River are very important financially both locally and statewide.

Evaluation of the Green River Study as I see it

One of the most striking items of information to come out of the 1991 Study, to me at least, is illustrated by the chart below from page 189 of the study.

Table 72. Satisfaction levels for first-time and repeat visitors.

Dissatisfied

Moderately Satisfied
 Satisfied
 Highly Satisfied
 Exceeded Expectations
 Mean

(1)
 (2)
 (3)
 (4)
 (5)

First-time
 3%
 15%
 33%
 40%
 10%
 3.4

Repeat
 4%
 15%
 38%
 38%
 5%
 3.3

Total
 3%
 15%
 36%
 39%
 7%
 3.3

On page 18 of the study, it says, "Green River managers must decide what type of experience is to be managed for and who that experience is to be created for." This decision has not been made yet, to my knowledge, and would seem to be the first thing to be done. Will the Green River be managed for the 3% that are dissatisfied or for the 97% that are satisfied with their experience? On page 24 the statement is made that "The maintenance of carrying capacity in the Green River corridor probably has more to do with the quality of experience preferred by visitors than it has with any absolute limit to the number of people which should not be transgressed". The study also stated on page 59 that "it is the success or failure of management that will determine whether repeat users keep coming back". What these statements say is that the vast majority of visitors are satisfied with their experience on the Green River and that the management decisions that are to be made will be responsible as to whether the repeat visitors will return or not return,

i.e. the success or failure of the commercial outfitters.

Many other conclusions can be drawn from this study such as the demographics of the users, time and money spent, levels of satisfaction and type of use. One other important finding comes from the Table 98 on page 258. The perceptions of problems by major activity. This shows that, in descending order, litter on the banks, litter in the river, changes in river flows, not enough campsites, toilets between access points, law enforcement, human waste, access to river, toilets at access points, people drinking, quality of campsites, information services, and access to trails and roads are the problems identified by users. Crowding and too many guides are not on this list and do not seem to be considered by the study to be major problems.

Effects of U.S.F.S. Proposed Restrictions

On March 31, 1995, the U.S. Forest Service issued its E.A. for proposed changes to the management of the Green River From Flaming Gorge Dam to the Colorado State line. To the present time, this is the only document that has been issued on this subject. GROGA has been informed that the new decision notice will have the final draft of the E.A. and that there have been many changes from this document to the one that will come out "soon". It is therefore hard to comment on the proposed changes since no one outside of the F.S. has seen them. It will be easy, however, to comment on the proposals that are contained in the draft E.A. of March 31, 1995.

This E.A. identified five alternative management plans and picked one that the F. S. felt would be the best. Alternative B was identified by the F.S. as their preferred alternative. It was divided into three parts. First, restrictions on public use, second, restrictions on commercial guide use, and finally, safety requirements. My comments are limited to the commercial guide use. The following is the entire proposal for commercial guide usage.

2. Commercial Outfitting (for fishing from watercraft) limits for any given day: (FS and BLM)

Daily Boat Launch Limits

SEASONS OF USE

SECTION A

SECTION B

SECTION C

1ST FISHING

4/1--6/15

30

20

NO LIMIT

MONITOR

FLOAT & FISH

6/16--9/3

20

20

NO LIMIT

MONITOR

2ND FISHING
9/4--10/31
20
20
NO LIMIT
MONITOR

Seasons of use, 1st fishing, float & fish, and second fishing are strictly name of periods of time and do not limit activities. The names were chosen to indicate the primary activities occurring during the period. These management limits will be managed within the following constraints: -limit the number of outfitter companies to no more than 10. -The number of launches available (per chart above) will be divided between companies as defined in their prospectus response and by the selection panel. There is no plan to limit the number of private launches with this alternative. Private launches will be controlled by the number of people on each section of the River at one time. These numbers will fluctuate daily depending on whether the visitors choose to hike the trails, walk/wade fish, float or boat fish.

This is the entire preferred alternative as it pertains to the commercial outfitters. It is very easy to see why the Guide Association opposed this alternative. What we don't understand is why more than a year later, we still don't have a workable management system.

Under the current 2440 System in place, the only controls on any user groups on the Green River are on the commercial outfitters. We are 5% of the total A Section use and are only 7% of the total river use. It is hard to understand how restriction on use for only this small user group can have any significant effect of crowding or any other problem on the river.

According to the Green River Study, page 89, 92% of all river users and 94% of all fishers made their visit to the Green River the primary purpose of their trip. To publicly announce or to even hint that there will be restrictions on users will cause a negative reaction by these users. They will not invest the time or money to travel to the Green River if they feel that their use may be limited or that they cannot do the activity that they are traveling to participate in. This will have an obvious and severe impact on not only commercial outfitters but also on all businesses that are part of the industry that has been built around the Green River.

We propose that these users be allowed to make their own decisions about whether or not they would return to the Green River based on their own satisfaction with their experience and not by a determination by the Forest Service or any other agency as to whether they had a good experience. We believe that the marketplace will control crowding and that people will return as long as they are satisfied. If they feel crowded or unsatisfied with their experience, they will

- 1- not come back,
- 2- use a different section of the river,
- 3- come at a different time of year.

I feel that the most important thing to remember in all management decisions is that the visitors, i.e. general public or all users, be the ones to make these decisions, not the F.S., BLM, or any other agency.

Questions to ask me

What services do the members of the Green River Outfitter and Guide Association provide?

How does the F.S. and the Guide Association monitor and ensure quality experiences for the members of the public using our service?. 1- overall, 2- my operation at the Flaming Gorge Lodge specifically.

What were the responses to the surveys and questionnaires in 1995?

What would change on the Green River if all commercial outfitter restrictions were removed, keeping in place of, course, guide and outfitter licensing and insurance requirements and all necessary accounting procedures?

Questions to ask the Forest Service

Is the general public, both commercial users and non-commercial users, capable of deciding for themselves as to whether or not they are having a good experience or are satisfied with their experience? If they are not capable, who at the U.S. Forest Service is?

What Green River experience is to be managed?

Who is this experience to be managed for? The 97% of persons whose responses ranged from satisfied to exceeded expectations or for the 3% who were dissatisfied?

If the F.S. monitored outfitter-guide usage did not exceed the proposed limits as set forth in Alternative B on any day on any section of the Green River, and only equaled the proposed limits on one section on two days, what is the problem?

What would change on the Green River if all restrictions on outfitter-guide usage were removed except for outfitter-guide licensing, registration, and accounting procedures? What drastic changes would occur?

If the desire of the local F.S. managers is to sit with GROGA and formulate a workable management system, why have we waited since 1988 for this to happen? Why has it still not happened?

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